

Bilirakis Op-Ed: Washington Times | Stop handing visas to wannabe terrorists

In Print: Friday, February 12, 2010 - [View](#)

By Rep. Gus Bilirakis

In the wake of the Christmas Day bombing attempt, much was made about the need for our intelligence community to do a better job of "connecting the dots" to stop terrorists before they board planes bound for the United States. After weeks of mixed messages, self-examination and congressional investigations, the Department of Homeland Security recently unveiled its budget request to Congress for the coming year. Because budgets reflect priorities, I had hoped to see that the near-miss on Christmas Day had served as a wake-up call to get serious about stopping these killers before they strike again.

I was greatly disappointed.

The Visa Security Program (VSP), which places highly trained security officers at overseas posts to thoroughly investigate and scrutinize visa applications so those who are trying to gain entry into our country to do us harm are stopped before they get here, is a logical countermeasure to terrorist attempts to enter the United States. However, the administration has not seen fit to support the aggressive expansion of this protection.

Just 14 of the 220 Department of State posts around the world have Visa Security Units (VSU). More than 40 locations have been identified as high priority because terrorists may seek to exploit their potential weaknesses. At the pace outlined in the administration's budget, it would take nearly two decades to bridge the gap and bring the 40 high-risk locations up to speed. We need to maximize our resources immediately and bolster our visa-screening capabilities at American consulates around the world before the next attack results in a tragic loss of life.

The VSP is literally the nation's first line of defense against those who wish to gain entry to our country for the wrong reasons. Yet this administration continues to shortchange the program, failing to ask for necessary resources to place units in needed areas as quickly as possible and allowing ambassadors to veto the expansion of VSUs because they fear it will insult the local citizenry. In my view, it's worth a few hurt feelings in foreign countries to make our country safer.

Concerned about inadequacies in the screening process and background checks conducted on those seeking temporary admission to our country, I proposed legislation during the last Congress to require more thorough scrutiny of those seeking student visas and better monitoring of their activities once foreign students enter the country. In June, the House adopted my amendment to the 2010 homeland security appropriations bill, which shifted \$1.7 million from administrative functions at the Department of Homeland Security to be used solely to open additional Visa Security Units. Unfortunately, the final version of the bill that was enacted into law scaled back that amount to include only an additional \$500,000 for this purpose.

On Jan. 21, I sent a letter to Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano highlighting the need to expand the Visa Security Program and asking why the program hadn't been accelerated in light of recent events. She has yet to respond.

This administration must stop focusing on granting terrorists legal rights, closing the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay (which is better than most American prisons, as I saw firsthand when I visited earlier this year) and importing terrorists into our country to stand trial. Instead, the Obama administration needs to start figuring out how best to prevent terrorists from getting visas to carry out their murderous attacks, as they did so ruthlessly on Sept. 11, 2001. Aggressively expanding the Visa Security Program would be a very good first step.

The public deserves an explanation about why the Department of Homeland Security isn't rapidly expanding this terrorist-detection program. Ms. Napolitano needs to provide answers when she testifies before the House Homeland Security Committee on the budget. The secretary may have an explanation for the administration's unwillingness to quickly expand the Visa Security Program, but it certainly hasn't been communicated to Congress or the American people. Hopefully, we won't all pay the price for this inaction.

Rep. Gus Bilirakis, Florida Republican, is ranking member of the Homeland Security Committee's subcommittee on management, investigations and oversight.